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NOTE OF A MEETING HELD IN THE CABINET OFFICE ON 15th MAY, 1985, TO
DISCUSS THE PRESENTATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
POLICY

(7th Meeting)

P R E S E N T

The Rt. Hon. Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

The Rt. Hon. Sir Keith Joseph MP Secretary of State for Education & Science	The Rt. Hon. Patrick Jenkin MP Secretary of State for the Environment
The Rt. Hon. John Biffen MP Lord Privy Seal	The Rt. Hon. Tom King MP Secretary of State for Employment
The Rt. Hon. Peter Rees QC MP Chief Secretary, Treasury	The Rt. Hon. Lord Young of Graffham, Minister without Portfolio
Mr. John Gummer MP Paymaster General	Mr. Norman Lamont MP Minister of State, Department of Trade & Industry
Mr. Raymond Whitney MP Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Security	Mr. Bernard Ingham Chief Press Secretary to the Prime Minister

SECRETARIAT

Mr. L. W. Lewis
Miss S. E. Wallace

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that the Group would wish to take stock of the latest information on the impact of its work.

THE PAYMASTER GENERAL said that it was clear that the Government's point of view was being expressed much more frequently than before on local radio by both Ministers and backbenchers. The position with regard to regional television, though patchy, was generally much less encouraging. He would continue to take steps to try to improve the position.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that he was also concerned that the current stories concerning the Social Security Reviews should be countered, in advance of the Reviews' publication, where they were wholly without foundation. Otherwise considerable damage might be inflicted on the Government's image irrespective of the accuracy of the speculation. In discussion, it was agreed that it would be difficult to counter each and every ill founded report in advance of the Green Paper being published. Nevertheless, it was important to rebut firmly any suggestion

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that the basic state pension was to be reduced as a result of the Reviews. THE LORD PRESIDENT, summing up the discussion, said that the Group were agreed that it would be useful to put out a note making clear that the Government had no intention of responding to every single allegation about the Social Security Reviews in advance of their publication but making the point also that there was no intention to change the basic state pension.

THE LORD PRESIDENT said that the Group would wish to consider the note setting out a proposed campaign to meet the criticism that the fabric of Britain was decaying. The campaign was intended in particular to dispel the myths that this was an expenditure cutting Government and that Britain was falling into decay because of alleged public expenditure cuts.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- There were dangers in the proposed campaign. In certain areas, such as education, it was undoubtedly true that buildings were less well maintained than had previously been the case. While this was partly due to LEAs spending money intended for repair and maintenance on teachers' salaries, it was nevertheless the case that it would be difficult to persuade the public that in some areas public provision was improving. It was also the case that, while spending on public sector capital projects had been broadly maintained in real terms at its 1980 level, that level was itself a considerable reduction on what had been spent in earlier years. It was important, therefore, that any campaign should not lose credibility by appearing to contradict a widespread perception of reality.
- On the other hand, it was clear that the Government's record on capital spending and investment was good in a number of areas, such as hospital building, roads, water and sewerage and railway modernisation. This achievement was not widely recognised and the proposed campaign could do much to remedy this. The achievements of other programmes such as urban policy and the Community Programme were also substantial and needed to be made more widely known.
- The emphasis in the note on building up the campaign locally and regionally was extremely important. People understood the effects of Government policy in their own community - e.g. a new hospital - whereas they were less convinced by figures of national performance. If information could be provided on the fruits of Government expenditure, regionally and locally, with hard and fast examples, this would do a great deal to aid backbenchers and others in getting over the Government's record on public spending.

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THE LORD PRESIDENT, summing up the discussion, said that the Group were conscious of the dangers associated with the proposed campaign. Nevertheless, there was a clear need to improve the presentation of the Government's case in this area and the campaign could be a major step forward in that respect. As a first response, information ought to be put together on spending by region and by locality. THE LORD PRESIDENT said that he would obtain such information in respect of two forthcoming regional visits which he was making and would seek thereby to obtain good local publicity. Based on that experience, the Group could consider extending the campaign more widely at a later meeting.

In discussion of other issues, the Group agreed that a background note might usefully be prepared on the forthcoming Green Paper on Higher Education; that in commenting on unemployment, Ministers should continue to stress the increases in employment; and that the Group would need in due course to consider the handling of the Government's study on local government finance.

Leigh Lewis
Cabinet Office

16th May, 1985

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